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Trump Reverses Restrictions on Military Hardware for Police

By **Adam Goldman**

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WASHINGTON — Police departments will now have access to military surplus equipment typically used in warfare, including grenade launchers, armored vehicles and bayonets, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced on Monday, describing it as “lifesaving gear.”

The move rescinds limits on the Pentagon handouts that were put in place by President Barack Obama in 2015 amid a national debate over policing touched off by a spate of high-profile deaths of black men at the hands of the police, including the shooting death in 2014 of 18-year-old Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Mo., by a white officer. Some local residents viewed police use of military equipment during the ensuing protests as an unnecessary show of force and intimidation.

In a speech to the Fraternal Order of Police in Nashville, Mr. Sessions said Mr. Obama had made it harder for the police to protect themselves and their neighborhoods.

“Those restrictions went too far,” Mr. Sessions said. “We will not put superficial concerns above public safety.”



“We will not put superficial concerns above public safety,” Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a speech to the Fraternal Order of Police in Nashville on Monday.

Mark Humphrey/Associated Press

Mr. Sessions said that President Trump would sign an executive order on Monday fully restoring the military program, called 1033, and that the president was doing “all he can to restore law and order and support our police across America.”

Mr. Sessions has rolled back a number of Obama-era efforts toward police reform. In April, he ordered a sweeping review of federal agreements with dozens of law enforcement agencies, including consent decrees with troubled police departments nationwide.

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Mr. Obama ordered a review of the Pentagon program in late 2014 after the police responded to protests with armored vehicles, snipers and riot gear. The images of police officers with military gear squaring off against protesters around the country angered

community activists who said law enforcement agencies were reacting disproportionately.

In addition to the prohibitions on certain military surplus gear, he added restrictions on transferring some weapons and devices, including explosives, battering rams, riot helmets and shields.

The Pentagon said 126 tracked armored vehicles, 138 grenade launchers and 1,623 bayonets had been returned since Mr. Obama prohibited their transfer.

The program was started in the 1990s as a way for the military to transfer surplus equipment to federal, state and local police agencies fighting the drug war. More than \$5 billion in surplus gear has been funneled to law enforcement agencies.

Local law enforcement officials have defended the program, saying that it is a way to acquire equipment that is useful in dangerous situations without stretching tight budgets. For example, the Harris County Sheriff's Office in Texas, the site of severe flooding in recent days, received two armored vehicles under the program. One was used for high-risk operations and the other for high-water rescues.

Vanita Gupta, the former head of the Justice Department's civil rights division under Mr. Obama, criticized Mr. Trump's policy reversal. She said the limits were created to make sure police departments "had a guardian, not warrior, mentality."

"Our communities are not the same as armed combatants in a war zone," Ms. Gupta said in a statement. "It is especially troubling that some of this equipment can now again be used in schools where our children are sent to learn."

Trump's decision angered community activists and some Republicans. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky said in a tweet: "I will oppose this move by the AG and administration. And I will continue to fight for our civil liberties and criminal justice reform."



People were rescued from flood waters from Hurricane Harvey in an armored police vehicle in Dickinson, Tex., on Sunday. Rick Wilking/Reuters

After learning about changes to the program, an animated Representative Mark Sanford, Republican of South Carolina, said, “Are you kidding me?” Mr. Sanford recalled traveling to a small South Carolina county when he was governor and finding a sheriff taking helicopter lessons because, Mr. Sanford noted, the jurisdiction had “pulled about seven copters” thanks to the federal program.

“This makes my blood boil,” he said, from “both a taxpayer standpoint and a civil liberties standpoint.”

Administration officials defended the restoration of the program, saying the police need all the tools available to do their jobs.

In a set of talking points distributed ahead of the announcement, the Justice Department noted that a military-style helmet saved the life of an officer responding to last year’s mass shooting in Orlando, Fla., in which a gunman killed 49. Armored vehicles and military gear were also used to hunt the two terrorists who mounted an attack in San Bernardino, Calif., in 2015.

The document says much of the equipment provided through the 1033 program is “entirely defensive in nature.”

But it is not clear why the police need bayonets, which the talking points did not address. Even the Pentagon has said it does not understand why the police would require them. Trump administration officials said that the police believed bayonets were handy, for instance, in cutting seatbelts in an emergency.

Jonathan Martin contributed reporting.

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